

# A Public Speaking Course

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*By Wang Tong*

Public speaking, or rhetoric, is an ancient art, which, in western culture, dates back to the ancient Greeks. Greek sophists, the rhetorical experts, were much sought after and enjoyed great popularity at that time. The vitality of rhetoric exists today as evidence in the high acclaim of the basic public speaking course in many institutions of higher learning.

Students of western languages should be exposed to and trained in this art so as to develop their communicative ability in the target language and a deeper understanding of western culture; English majors are no exception. Unfortunately, in China's foreign language institutions, public speaking is not in the curricula.

As an English teacher at Beijing Second Foreign Language Institute and a communication consultant in 1996, I set out to remedy the situation by introducing a public speaking course to seniors in the English Department. According to my July 1997 data, more than 98% of the trainees improved their confidence with the target language, developed their creative and logical thinking, and became more motivated in communicating in English. All course recipients expressed the need for incorporating the course into the present curriculum for English majors.

My public speaking course is not complex. The first one-hour session is "theory" time when certain skills in my course book are discussed, using some sample speeches and presentations. These are either videotaped, recorded, or written. The purpose of this hour is to familiarize the students with certain speaking skills and prepare them for the following practice session.

The second hour is "do-it-yourself" time. First, students view one or two videotaped homework speeches made by their peers and then comment on the positive and negative aspects of the speeches. This task aims at helping the learners develop a critical eye by drawing upon their observations. Then, students working in groups of four or five make impromptu speeches on topics introduced by their group leaders. Speakers receive feedback after finishing their speeches. It is during this practice that students are encouraged to tryout those target skills discussed in the previous hour.

After much observation, I discovered that Chinese students benefited greatly from this course, particularly, in the two sessions of videotape discussion and in-group speech making.

## **Videotape Discussion**

Each class session I assign a homework topic to two students who will present their speeches during the next class. The speeches are then videotaped and analyzed by the class using the following example of a feedback form (See Figure 1 below). Several observers write down their observations of certain target skills and give feedback to the speakers.

This kind of practice is never an easy job for beginning students because they have to juggle several balls at the same time. They have to jot down what the problems and merits are; how

serious or good they are; how they affect the audience; and how they can be improved or strengthened. In all, observer students have to have several pairs of "eyes" in order to do the job well.

At the beginning I always pause the videotape and throw in some helping clues, such as "look at the hands," "listen to the sentence structure," or I simply rewind the tape for observers to catch more points, but I never do their job. Not until the very end of the feedback session do I give my views of the observed performances. This is done so students can digest the targeted skills and sharpen their critical eyes. Only when they begin to "find faults" with other students' performances can they develop a strong awareness of their own speaking skills.

Finally, students become more and more critical of their sentence structures, choices of words, body movements, eye contact, vocal quality, and many other elements in their speaking which have gone unnoticed.

Through this practice, students not only become better speakers, but also better critics.

## **In-group speech making**

This activity is loosely patterned on Toastmaster's\* club activities, but it is simpler. Students are split into groups of four to five. The pre-appointed chairperson of each group introduces his/her prepared topic area to group members and then invites each to give his/her view. Team members stand up before the group and give improvised speeches. Each is allowed to take several seconds to form an outline before presenting the speech. A round is ten minutes: five minutes for the speech and another five minutes for feedback. A chairperson summarizes each round, manages time, and submits a written report to the instructor about the group performance. The observers use the following example of a General Evaluation form to write notes and comments (See Figure 2 below).

At first this activity intimidated my students, but later it became a magnet in the course. As chairpersons, students became even stricter and gave different topics in different rounds so that group members never knew beforehand what they were supposed to talk about until their turns came.

## **Conclusion**

The public speaking course has provided a communicative environment in which students share substantive ideas, explore topics, and develop personal characteristics. In this sense, this course is personal, democratic, and, more importantly, rewarding.

As a result of this training many students have demonstrated a greater confidence when speaking in public, a quickness in logical and creative thinking, and critical ability in their aesthetic judgement, all of which stimulates their motivation in the target language acquisition. Moreover, by acting as chairperson, students have developed leadership and group management abilities, and have become more cooperative and efficient with group work.

## **References**

Capp, G. 1981. Basic oral communication. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

\*Toastmasters International is devoted to making effective oral communication a worldwide reality. Through its member clubs, Toastmasters International helps people learn the arts of speaking, listening and thinking. (The Toastmasters, March 1996, CA., U.S.A.)

**Figure 1**

**Feedback form- Speech to convince**

TITLE:

SPEAKER

OBSERVER:

*Observed items*

*(please put your observation after each item)*

1. Introduction

- Clear?
- Interesting?

2. Body

- Clear structure?
- Sound reasoning?
- Sufficient evidence?
- Statistics?
- Quotations?
- Visual Aids?
- Effective sentence structure?
- Fulfilled purpose?

3. Conclusion

- Summary?
- Motivating?

4. Delivery

- Body movements?
- Eye contact?
- Hand gestures?
- Volume?
- Rate?
- Vocal variations
- Vocal pauses?

- Clear articulation
- Correct pronunciation

5. Other comments

**Figure 2**

**General Evaluation Form (Capp 1981)**

Name of speaker:

Name of observer:

Topic:

*Please observe the following areas:*

1. **Choice of topic**  
Interesting?  
Appropriate?
2. **Introduction**  
Creates interest?  
Previews main ideas?
3. **Investigation**  
Sufficient information?  
New or surprising information?
4. **Forms of support**  
Are ideas developed?  
Are points proven?
5. **Organization**  
Easy to follow?  
Moves smoothly from point to point?
6. **Language**  
Clear?  
Vivid?
7. **Delivery**  
Natural?  
Enthusiastic?
8. **Conclusion**  
Summarizes main points?  
Makes central idea memorable?
9. **Overall effectiveness**  
Carries out speaker's purpose?  
How did the audience react?  
What did you especially like?

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